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CHRISTIAN REID

From Notre Dame, Indiana, on Lætare Sunday, March 20, 1909, there came the announcement that the University of Notre Dame, which annually confers the Lætare Medal on some lay member of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States for distinguished service in art, literature, science, or philanthropy, would this year confer this honor upon Frances Christine Fisher Tiernan, known to the literary world under the pen-name of "Christian Reid." Beginning with 1883, when the Lætare Medal was first awarded, it has been conferred in succession upon John Gilmary Shea, historian; Patrick J. Keeley, architect; Eliza Allen Starr, author and critic; General John Newton, soldier and scientist; Partick V. Hickey, editor; Anna Hanson Dorsey, author; William J. Onahan, publicist; Daniel Dougherty, orator and publicist; Major Henry F. Brownson, soldier and scholar; Patrick Donahoe, publicist and philanthropist; Augustin Daly, theatrical manager; Anna T. Sadler, author; General William S. Rosecrans, soldier; Hon. Richard C. Kerans, philanthropist; Mr. Thomas Addis Emmet, author and scientist; Hon. Timothy E. Howard, jurist; John A. Creighton, philanthropist; Hon. William Bourke Cockran, orator and statesman; Dr. John B. Murphy, surgeon; Hon. Charles J. Bonaparte, jurist and statesman; Thomas B. Fitzpatrick, philanthropist; Dr. Francis Quinlan, surgeon; Katherine Eleanor Conway, author and editor; James C. Monaghan, publicist and educator. The award in 1909 to Mrs. Tiernan for the first time brings the Lætare Medal to the South, and in so doing, makes North Carolina doubly aware and doubly proud of the distinguished novelist whose work spans the wide space of almost four decades.

There exists no more striking commentary alike upon the modesty of Southern talent and upon its usual portion of local neglect than is furnished by the career of the novelist, Christian Reid. Though the author of some thirty novels and numerous short stories, she is so indifferent to "popular" success

that only with difficulty is she ever induced to speak of her literary career; and her portrait was recently published for the first time. No account of her life and career in the least trustworthy has ever been published. In this day of blatant self-puffery, the discovery of a writer of the strongest sense of the sanctity of personality and private life is a most refreshing rarity. Christian Reid's admirers in Salisbury, North Carolina, have paid her the tribute of founding the Christian Reid Book Club, which has been in existence for a decade.

To-day Mrs. Frances Christine Tiernan — to give her the name by which she is known in social intercourse — lives with her aunt, Miss Christine Fisher, in a graceful and dignified seclusion upon Salisbury's most beautiful street, Fulton. In appearance Mrs. Tiernan is distinguished and aristocratic, with fine eyes and delicately chiseled features, and her home bears all the marks of a régime of classic courtesy and culture. The memorials of the Confederacy and of her gallant father which adorn the walls; the books and magazines which fill the study; and the Roman Catholic Chapel which stands at the northeast corner of the yard, epitomize the profound and absorbing interests of her life. For she is a devout and zealous Roman Catholic, and her fidelity to the Lost Cause has led her to proclaim her faith in that cause, even from a public platform. Moreover, her devotion to letters demonstrates that she has lived in two worlds — the past and the present South; and her literary interests have been wide enough to include poetry, drama, travel-notes, and fiction.

Frances Christine Fisher was born in Salisbury, North Carolina, on July 5, 1846. A child of unusual imaginative precocity, she showed in her earliest youth a determination at once amusing and inspiring to realize her fancies. As a child of three or four, before she had learned to form her letters, she would spin out long tales of fanciful invention, which she persuaded, one might almost say compelled, her aunt to transcribe. Her inclination to express her fancies in written form continued to grow upon her, in spite of the discouragement she met with on every hand. From time to time she wrote stories for the delectation of herself and the other members of her

family; but it was not until the end of the war, when the family found itself without a head, and practically without fortune, that she conceived the idea of putting her talents to a profitable account. Her placid announcement, "I shall write a novel," was greeted with amused skepticism by the other members of the family. The publication of *Valerie Aylmer* in 1870 was the beginning of her literary career.

In choosing her pen-name, Christian Reid was actuated by a desire to find a name which would be simple and applicable to either man or woman. Christian is one of the forms of Christine, and Reid suggested itself as at once brief, good, and unpretentious.

Christian Reid's career as a woman of letters falls quite naturally into three distinct divisions, revealing not so much a progressive evolution in talent, as the influential impress upon her art of certain events in her life. Those works which have been most effectively successful, or which evince the greatest refinement of art, stand out, not so much as the flowering of any distinctive artistic purpose progressively evolutionary, but rather as distinct achievements, noteworthy in themselves quite aside from their relation to her other works.

The first period of Christian Reid's literary activities comprises the decade from 1869 to 1879. Most notable of the works of this period are the novels, *Morton House* (1871), *A Daughter of Bohemia* (1874), and *A Question of Honor* (1875); and the short travel-sketch, superficially cast in narrative form, *The Land of the Sky* (1876).

It is not without its peculiar significance that the year 1870, which marks the synchronous birth of the new industrial movement and the new literary movement in the South, found Christian Reid at work upon her first novel, *Valerie Aylmer*. She had passed through the economic and social "valley of the shadow of death" in the South, and in letters she sought some relief from the ceaseless pressure of the struggle for material existence. *Valerie Aylmer* was an instant success, and enjoyed a considerable sale, judged by the standards of that day. Needless to say, it was faulty and immature; yet it possessed the inalienable charm of interest, and exhibited the "continual

slight novelty" which is the sign-manual of romance. Together with most of the other stories of this early period, it is chiefly of interest for its portrayal of then prevailing standards of life and conduct in the South, as reflected through the temperament of a very impressionable, romantic, not to say sentimental, young lady of distinguished birth and breeding. This was a period in the South's history, one may perhaps infer, when lovers were ready to sacrifice everything—even love itself—to fine-spun scruples of honor and the unyielding demands of personal pride; when heroines were alternately haughty and melting, defiant and larmoyant, self-centred and self-sacrificing; when heroes always smoked "fragrant Havana cigars which exhaled a delicious aroma," were beau-ideals of physical manhood, and stormed the heights of love with all the *élan* of actualized Cyranos; when life itself was cast in a more heroic mould than now, and chivalry had not yet been done to death by the brutal hand of commercialism. The title of the most natural and verisimilar study of post-bellum life in this group, *A Question of Honor*, might well serve without alteration or distortion of sense, as the title of a great many of Christian Reid's earlier works. The finely-spun, yet in themselves highly self-oblivious scruples of Madeleine and Devereux are the subtle instruments by which their characters are ultimately revealed to each other, and in this way quite justify their existence through the end so legitimately accomplished. Treating of types and situations with which she is thoroughly familiar in her daily life, the novelist sustains the interest more by the sheer force of unassuming naturalness than by virtue of the plot; for aside from the question of honor the story is chiefly concerned with the incessant flirtations and frangible engagements of young people, naturally refined but rather provincial in tone. The saintly Madeleine, sadly lacking in any sense of humor, always gently but firmly critical, endures every disappointment and disillusionment with the most Christian fortitude. This type of heroine, capable of experiencing the profoundest emotions and continually called upon to do so, is the quintessential if not the invariant type found in the author's other works of this period. It is a mark of the author's devo-

tion to this gently ascetic ideal that she is almost cruel in delineation of characters cast in less heroic mould, who suffer from many of the prosaic faults and frailties that flesh is heir to.

Much the most brilliant novel of this period is *A Daughter of Bohemia*, rather melodramatic in plot, but inherently interesting through the compelling fascination of the recklessly, if excusably, Bohemian *belle demoiselle sans merci*. The plot is admirably ordered. We are plunged immediately *in medias res*, and the story appropriately ends with the death of the "beautiful blond villain"—who is simultaneously engaged to the two heroines—and the fitting reward of beauty and rather imprudent virtue. Perhaps the most solid and substantial novel of this period—a work of which the author once told me she felt no cause to be ashamed—is *Morton House*. For clarity in character-delineation, sustaining interest of story and strength of workmanship, *Morton House* is probably not excelled by any of Christian Reid's other works. But it lacks the pervasive appeal of *A Question of Honor*, the lively interest of *A Daughter of Bohemia*, and there is something of the wearied hunt for the wounded animal in the cumulative suffering of Katherine Tresham.

The most noteworthy book of Christian Reid's early years as a novelist, judged on the strength of its results, is the slight travel-sketch, entitled *The Land of the Sky*, which was published in 1876. In this book, read by hundreds of thousands of people, Christian Reid accomplished the most notable commemoration of a section of this country ever published in North Carolina; and I question whether any other work of so slight a character has ever been so influential in introducing a noble creation of God's handiwork to an unconscious world. This little book, originally appearing as a series of sketches in *Appleton's Journal*, is a perfect and accurate description of a trip through the mountains of western North Carolina; introducing among others such a well-known character as Tom Pence, the great stage-coach driver, who never had a mishap, though he always drove most recklessly when he was "three sheets in the wind." *The Land of the Sky* has made the wonderful moun-

tains of western North Carolina—the highest on this continent east of the Rockies—known throughout the entire United States; and to-day Asheville is the summer resort of the South most widely known in this country and on the continent of Europe. Christian Reid's book gave the beautiful aerial name to this section, and without exaggeration may be said to have pointed the way to that jewel in the circle of hills, the Sapphire Country; to Toxaway, and to Biltmore. This little book came in the days of the stage-coach, when Old Fort was the point of departure for a trip through the mountains, when, indeed, the region "beyond the gap" was something of a *terra incognita* to all save South Carolinians, perhaps. In this book Christian Reid, I have always felt, in some measure succeeded in doing for this section in the field of art what her father, Colonel Charles F. Fisher, as director of the Western North Carolina Railroad, succeeded in doing for it in railroad enterprise.

A distinct accession of power and increased mastery of style mark the works of Christian Reid's second period of literary activity, beginning after her return from Europe in 1880. *Heart of Steel* is a work approximating that of the standard English novelists, such as Anthony Trollope, in solidity of workmanship and concentration of purpose. Weak in its main thesis, revolving upon the rather hysterical prejudice of a most opinionated young girl, it is prolonged to too great length, reaching in the end less a *dénouement* than a mere conclusion. Yet the descriptions of Italy and the memories evoked by the living ghosts of the Eternal City reveal in full maturity the minute and a searching power of description first exhibited in *The Land of the Sky*. Other works of this period are *Armine*, *Roslyn's Fortune*, *The Child of Mary*, *Philip's Restitution*, and *Miss Churchill*. I have read *Miss Churchill* over many times in my life and have always felt that in it Christian Reid just escapes something like greatness. It is the old, old story of the tragic discovery when it is too late, the endless regret for "barren gain and bitter loss"—the lesson so beautifully embodied in her most representative poem, "If I had Known." From the standpoint of art, I have always

thought that there was something unjustifiable in the "providential intervention," this sudden gesture of the finger of Fate which robs the book of its essential coherence.

When, in 1887, Miss Frances Christine Fisher was married to Mr. James Marquis Tiernan, of Maryland, and settled in Mexico, where her husband had extensive mining interests, there began the third period in Christian Reid's career as a novelist. Perhaps, the story which, of all that she has ever written, contains more of the elements of general popularity and is at the same time most adequately written, is *The Picture of Las Cruces*, which had the distinction of being translated into French and appearing in one of the most admirable of French magazines, *L'Illustration*. The book is notable for the beauty of its envisagement of a wonderful semi-tropical land, the ideality of its poetic atmosphere, and the graceful art displayed in the comparison and juxtaposition of the fragile romance of Mexico with the hardy realism of America. I have before me now the letter of that distinguished French literary critic, Monsieur C. D. Varigny, who, after reading *The Picture of Las Cruces*, wrote to Christian Reid: "You have talent, imagination, a clever pen and the gift of observation. You write soberly, clearly, and your personages move lifelike in the mirror of your imagination. I do not doubt that you may conquer fame." The sequel to *The Picture of Las Cruces*, with a similar title *The Lady of Las Cruces*, like most sequels (as people always say!) is less a natural consequence of the former story, than a hazardous attempt to crown the story with a "happy" (and popular) ending — much as Mansfield sought to "popularize" *Monsieur Beaucaire* as a stage play by the marriage of Beaucaire and Lady Mary Carlisle! Other works of this period are: the travel-romance, *The Land of the Sun*, an interesting and realistic description of Mexico — that land of sunshine and flowers; *Carmela*, *Little Maid of Mexico*, *A Comedy of Elopement*, *A Woman of Fortune*, *Weighed in the Balance*, and *Carmen's Inheritance*. In addition, there are two novels which stand as memorials of Christian Reid's travels in beautiful, world-forgotten Santo Domingo. These are: *The Man of the Family*, which deals with the French end, and *The Chase of an*

Heiress, dealing with the Spanish end of the island. Although Christian Reid once assured me that it is of interest chiefly for its descriptions of Santo Domingo, I have always thought that she has written no more delightfully readable book, slight though it be, than *The Man of the Family*. Perhaps credulity is a trifle taxed by the successful preservation of the heroine's incognito in the rôle of a man; but this aids rather than hinders in the creation of a genuine romance (the refined prototype of many later and cruder stories, such as *Into the Primitive*) in which the escapes are none the less hair-breadth for all the restraint exhibited in the narration.

Christian Reid has written at least two dramas, and quite a number of poems. The war-drama, *Under the Southern Cross*, is a stirring picture of the South during the war between the States, and has been played to enthusiastic houses throughout the South. Its purport is to voice an impassioned presentation, fired by logic, of the views of the South upon the constitutional right of secession; in details it is a bright play with two heroes and two heroines — and the "Southern Beauty" does *not* marry the "Northern Conqueror" (*à la* Belasco, William Gillette, *et id omne genus*). The other play, entitled *Princess Nadine*, has appeared in print only as a novel. It was originally written as a play, which I was so fortunate as to hear read in manuscript just after it was written. The play was rewritten in collaboration with Mr. Victor Mapes, and gives promise of being ultimately produced by David Belasco. The novel has recently been distinguished by translation into Italian, and appears in a series of works by authors of such world-wide fame as Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Paul Bourget, and René Bazin. Although concerning itself with a mediatized princeling and an unknown European principality with a euphonious name (after the manner of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Princess Aline*, *The Puppet Crown*, and even *Graustark*), *Princess Nadine* was written first of all. I have read it several times, and always found it interesting and exciting. There is a sort of diamantine quality about the sharply-chiseled dialogue; the characters play at cross purposes with a madness akin to method; and the new surprise on every

page rushes one headlong to the finish. The Russian princess is half American—the daughter of a “Forty-Niner;” and the hero, a South American dictator, had for his father an American, who fought for the South in the war between the States. The duel of sex, the contest of the vigorously self-assertive South American with the *hauteur* of, and the hereditary divinity which hedges about, the princess, is sustained at high pitch throughout and against all obstacles. The most delightful and interesting character in the book, however, is neither the masterful dictator nor yet the all-too-faultless princess, but a pert, vivacious, and treacherous little American soubrette.

Christian Reid enjoys the distinction of being the most notable novelist North Carolina has ever produced, alike in the quality of her art and the volume of her achievement. Her most notable essays in fiction have been honored with translation into French and Italian. She is the first person of either sex, in the South, upon whom the Lætare Medal has been conferred. It is no banal truism to say of her art that it is preëminently lofty in tone and elevated in sentiment. The characteristic notes of her fictive art are purity of purpose and a delicacy of sentiment, which is the genuine flower of Southern civilization. She has always cherished the very strongest feeling for the responsibility of the written word. And in her classic speech in acceptance of the Lætare Medal, she said:

“As in everything human there is both a soul and a body, so we find the soul of art in its relation to the great law of ethics, and those who awarded this medal are well aware that there is no greater fallacy, no more destructive principle working in our time than the belief that art stands apart from ethics. Of nothing in our complex existence when we ‘cannot stir a flower without troubling a star,’ can that be said, and least of all of art.

“For the largeness of art depends upon its power of drawing into itself and giving expression to all the vital emotions of humanity, and the ethical emotion is not only one of these, but it is the most vital. When it is ignored or decried, the literature which is the result has, under whatever beauty of idea or form it may possess, the unmistakable note of decadence. There

is in it no uplifting power, no lesson to be learned that will help us in the struggle of life, but on the contrary an insidious, often an open teaching of bitterness, of futile revolt against the conditions which surround our existence. The writers who produce this literature are frequently described as realists, but their realism is as false as their philosophy, since that is no realism which paints only the darkest side of human life, which ignores the sunlight, and which is blind to the value of the lessons that may be learned from failure and suffering. Of one thing we may be distinctly sure, the art which declines to acknowledge a divine purpose as the key to the riddle of man's existence signs its own sentence of extinction. For looking back over the wide field of literature, of the best which man has thought and said in all languages, we find that nothing survives the destroying touch of time save that which is in harmony with the eternal verities."

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